

Health Professionals: Supporting Children & their Whānau through COVID19: Managing Anxiety & Looking Forward

Key Points for those supporting children under stress:

- * **Keep it simple** – we are all under stress, find ways to lower your own anxiety to stop it spreading.
- * When it comes to COVID19 **Ask children what they know?** And what they would like to know – clarify any misconceptions and be guided by them....talking with kids is mostly about listening. Remember not all children want lots of information.
- * **Routines are so important** – for children under stress predictability and familiarity are very reassuring and calming.
- * **Offer realistic choices** to help increase a sense of active participation and control
- * **Reassure your children that there is a plan** – we are working hard to do the right things.
- * How can children or youth **actively contribute**...this helps give back **a sense of control, a positive focus.**
- * **The power of positive touch** – within your bubble hug, snuggle, make sure you are touching children with love often...this supports wellbeing and coping
- * **BREATHE**....with them, for them, for you....just do it....it will help :)

Cheat sheet for health care professionals:

- * Be aware children under stress are trying to make sense of things and will gather information in any way they can – be aware of what they see, hear...they may have misconceptions based on media coverage of COVID19 which has been very visually extreme with many in hospital beds on ventilators and health care workers and people in the community in many forms of PPE (masks, gowns etc).
- * This may be this child's first hospital experience – take time to explain in simple terms the use and purpose of equipment and test to decrease anxiety
- * Magical thinking (ages 4-10yrs) I am wary that the messaging around COVID19 is bold... keeping to the rules will save lives...children may create links such as “I was naughty, I caused it, I made grandma sick” this may be causing undue stress / worry
- * Stress impacts information processing and behaviour –for all involved... kids, whānau, MDT...and you...remember to keep it simple, when talking to patients provide information that can be referred back to if you can (handout, notes etc), be patient with yourself and others.
- * Regression is a normal reaction to stress and hospitalisation ...what this looks like varies by age group, children who were toilet trained may end up bedwetting, language skills may slip or sleep patterns become disrupted. Don't panic, for the most part this is temporary and when things settle this will improve. If you have ongoing concerns once the stress has passed you can seek assistance.
- * It is going to get busy – wherever possible please remember the importance of privacy and building trust....a quick introduction and checking in to make sure they understand – offer the opportunity to ask questions and invite them to participate in their care when possible as this makes it easier to engage in future interventions.

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Separated by healthcare events: Play specialist strategies for keeping connected to your children and whānau while you are apart.

- * Regular facetime/phone calls...do not be upset if children engage in this really readily initially and then lose interest...this often happens as the structure of having to come to the phone loses its appeal.
- * Find an activity to do together online – there are turn taking games in messenger or what's app, you could choose one silly filter to apply each day and send a picture – check in that homework is done or catch up on a show.
- * Have a virtual meet up for story time before bed
- * Record yourself singing their favourite song or ask them to sing one for you
- * Leave your child with one of your favourite scarves, sweatshirts or blankets to cuddle up in...to keep you close.
- * Tie thoughts to a memory – and share them with your child so that they know you are thinking of them... “I remember when you ate that chocolate pudding and got it all over your face...ever time I eat pudding here I think of you :)”
- * Let them create an interview for you – you can think of 10 questions each and then ask one another – this often creates great conversations and giggles.
- * Start a story – write 3-4 sentences and then let children at home add their 3-4 sentences – take turns until you are done – creative writing and an opportunity to illustrate if keen.
- * Find a joke to share each day....
- * Ask them to take a tour with you – many zoos, museums and special events are currently open to the public – shared and free to access online with virtual tours and experiences.

Some lovely stories about ongoing connections:

- * [The Invisible String : Patrice Karst](#)
- * [Lost and Found — Oliver Jeffers](#)

Remember to look after yourself at this time
Breathe, make time to play, relax and look for the good
Kia kaha

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Supporting our littlest ones: infants and toddlers

Although we may not take time to explain to babies and toddlers about COVID-19 specifically they are impacted by the general increase in anxiety and parental stress. This will be particularly difficult for new parents, those isolated or with additional stressors.

How you can support:

- * Caregiving for a little one can feel all consuming – difficult when there is additional stress: offer a break, cup of tea, a listening ear, acknowledge the situation and how they are feeling...little activities or distractions to break up the day can be great.
- * Encourage routines – normalcy is comforting
- * Reassure caregivers that they are doing all the right things – and that they have a great team here...
- * Who is their support crew? How can they keep in touch
- * Look for opportunities to provide a sense of purpose.
- * Encourage parents to reach out if it gets too much – let them know they can ask for help, support services are available.

Supporting Preschoolers: Explaining COVID-19

- * Simple messaging: use words they are familiar with:
 - At home do they use virus, germs or bugs?
 - Introduce common words that they will be seeing and hearing such as virus.
- * Ask them what they already know...or may have heard...this allows you to clarify any misconceptions (ie. the size of the virus)
- * Be consistent ...and patient...children may ask the same questions againand....again; repeated simple messaging is reassuring.
 - You don't need to tell them everything you know but be truthful – link it to things that they know and understand – being careful not to overwhelm.
 - Social distancing examples: it is like staying as far apart as you sit on one end of the couch and I sit on the other end; 2 meters = 7 bits of your Thomas train track...viruses are so tiny we could fit more than a million in that dot of paint we just made on your picture...super super small...can not even see them!
- * Play it out...use dolls, drawing, simple stories and hands on activities to explain the virus and ways to stay safe.
 - Try singing songs to reiterate hand hygiene, can they help make up some words to tunes they know?
 - Draw simple stories – Keep It Simple. Let children help illustrate it.
 - Science: Try the pepper, water and soap activity to show how effective soap is at repelling germs.

- * Reassure children that lots of clever people are working on solving the problem – and we all have a part to play...what is their job?
 - Can they think of inside games to play?
 - Call grandma on Facetime to check in?
 - Help wipe the light switches?

Supporting Preschoolers: Managing stress and worries

- * Routines are important – predictability is great
- * Acknowledge the situation and their feelings (and your own); however you feel is ok – brainstorm together what you can do to feel better if you are feeling worried or scared, frustrated or angry.
- * Make time for them to ask questions, but do not dwell (know that they may shift from focused concern to playing / just having fun and loop back again....this is totally normal)
- * Create perspective:
 1. Define time, this will not be forever. It will take as long as ___ fill in the blank but link to something they know and understand___.
 2. Focus on what they can do...rather than what they can not
- * Look for opportunities to provide simple choices which create a sense of control.
 1. Simple choices – 2 options is often enough – get wise – if you need a job done make sure both options are acceptable to you
 2. When things feel out of control or overwhelming simply deciding what to have for dinner or which story to read or how to walk to the shower...fairy steps or giant steps...these are simple options for giving some control back.
- * Remind them they have a great team here with lots of wonderful people looking after them, including mum or dad
- * Don't forget to breathe....some simple breathing exercises to try:
 1. Trace up and down their fingers, up one side of a finger to breathe in, down the other to breathe out...nice and slow....
 2. 3-4-5...breathe in for a count of 3, hold for 4 and breath out slowly for a count of 5.
 3. Get good eye contact and breathe together – nice and slow, 5 breathes in and out...one at a time. You got this.

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Supporting School Age Children 6-12 years Explaining COVID-19

- * Ask children what they know and clarify any misconceptions
- * Start simple and link explanations to things they already understand to create context...be guided by their level of interest :
 - * “when your sister had a tummy bug we kept our distance and made sure we were cleaning around the house and washing our hands – this is a bit like that – the COVID 19 virus is really good at sticking to things and moving from person to person so we need to make sure we are following the rules to make it harder for the virus to use us to move around, so we do not catch it or spread it.”
- * Kids this age are increasingly interested in how the body works – they start to understand cause and effect but they may not get it quite right in early years. For example – children may understand that they need blood to move around their body to keep them well... but may be anxious about repeated blood tests as they fear the loss of blood...thinking that blood loss means death. They have not developed their thinking far enough to understand that their body also makes blood to replace small amounts taken over time. $A+B=E$.
- * Hands on or active learning is helpful, activities, experiments, books or short videos are appropriate. WARNING – it is always best to preview and assess things before sharing to ensure they are appropriate.
 - * Try popping on a pair of latex gloves and using a dollop of paint to rub round to show them how well they wash their hands...you can have a go too!
 - * There are some great resources online such as Michelle Dickson’s Nanogirl great for 3-4 years and up...
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPsY-jLqaXM>
and for older school aged children this cartoon has great information:
 - * <https://thespinoff.co.nz/covid-19/25-03-2020/the-side-eye-viruses-vs-everyone/>
- * As children get older you can increase the level of detail you provide but please be aware more is not always better:
 - * Some children find information helpful
 - * For others more information increases their worries

Healthcare Teams Supporting Children & their Whānau through COVID19: Managing Anxiety & Looking Forward

Supporting School Age Children 6-12 years: Managing stress and worries

- * Limit media exposure / discussions and exchanges of information re COVID19.
- * Acknowledge fears or worries, address them with simple explanations or reassurance and remind them what they are able to do to protect themselves. Acknowledge that it is hard...Name it...make space and time to talk about it but don't wallow or circle round and round it....
- * Think about what they could do to make it better? Children this age often benefit from practical, hands on concrete activities or experiences...anything that encourages positive feedback from others, creates a sense of connection is a winning ticket. Remind children they have an active role to play in breaking the chain – stay home, wash your hands, keep your hands off your face – keep up with others outside of your bubble.
- * What skills do they already have? Lots of children do mindfulness in schools, breathing activities. What do they do when they worry about other things that may work now?
- * A worry jar or writing things down and then tearing them into many many pieces can be very therapeutic.
- * RE-frame things positively – “now we may have time to listen to some audiobooks, learn a new song or work in the garden together Get some exercise and fresh air close to home...during your “big stay in”
- * Help children keep perspective – most people who get unwell/covid19 get better, most people who are very unwell go to hospital and get better...only a very few people get very very unwell and there is no way to make them better
- * Find something that they can control or have some choices about – can they help decide what to make for dinner? Baking - cookies or cupcakes? Choose which card game to play? Simple choices are great when everything else is overwhelming.
- * Purposeful play – for fun, for stress relieve. Music, laughter and focused creative activities are great – so is screaming into a pillow or splatter painting with syringes or poking holes in playdough when you are frustrated or cross.

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Supporting Youth 11+years: Explaining COVID-19

- * Talk to them like you would to grownups – but check in to see that they understand ...simplify if required...
- * Ask them what they know – this is really important as they often get their information from friends/social media or google.
- * Encourage them to ask questions and talk about how to ensure accurate information; this is a great time to introduce critical thinking
- * Remind them that although this virus may not impact young people very badly it is so easily transmitted that they may carry it to others who may not manage so well.
- * The spin off did a great cartoon explaining how the virus works:
 - * <https://thespinoff.co.nz/covid-19/25-03-2020/the-side-eye-viruses-vs-everyone/>

Supporting Youth 11+ years: Managing stress & worries

- * Limit media exposure, conversations and time focused on COVID19
- * Fine balance between striving for independence and being in isolated with mum/dad or caregivers...increased isolated from peers and their experience.
- * Worries may be compounded by concerns for the personal risk of COVID19 - particularly for those with chronic conditions...
- * Acknowledge how they are feeling – it is totally normal to feel gutted about the restrictions, cancellations, lost opportunities and time away from peers.
- * The loss of contact with friends, girlfriends or boyfriends may be distressing. Ensure there are ways for them to keep up with friends: social media, phone, Facetime, zoom...games, music.
- * Brainstorm together ideas for non screen time activities; repetitive motion activities can be really therapeutic (complex colouring / needle work, kneading bread)
- * Focus on what they can control, ways of getting through, supporting others or things to look forward to...
- * Coping strategies - Youth focused resources (apps: smiling mind), games, mindful breathing, writing, exercise or time with friends
- * Watch for PJ-paralysis....easy to slip into a rut with no routine – encourage some structure to the day, shower regularly, up and dressed and make a plan.